

The Intersection of Mental Illness in Freshman and LGBTQ+ Students

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract:

Mental health in college students has been an issue that has become much more prevalent in recent years. The stigma that is attached to the term mental illness has slowly become less negative but that doesn't mean people are okay with mental illness. It is seen as a disease when it isn't. It is just like any other medical issue. It can be improved by therapy and medication. Mental illness tends to become recognizable when people are between the ages of 18-22. At that age, people are typically also experiencing their first chance at independence, going off to college and going through the process of identity formation. With these new life changes, mental illness can act as an additional -- and dangerous -- complication. In addition, being in the LGBTQ+ community as a freshman college student comes with its own difficulties and battles. This thesis will look at college freshmen's mental health, LGBTQ+ students and the intersection between the two.

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Process Analysis Statement:

When deciding a topic for my thesis, I decided to focus on mental health in college students. I chose this topic because as someone with General Anxiety Disorder, mental health awareness and education is very important to me. I am also able to relate to the topic as I was a college freshman dealing with my anxiety. I chose to narrow it down to LGBTQ+ students and look at the intersection there because I am very passionate about the community. I have close friends that are LGBTQ+ and wanted to focus on a minority group. I did a lot of research looking at different surveys that were done on mental health in college freshman and LGBTQ+ youth. I also found some sources that were specifically about mental health in regards to the LGBTQ+ community. Lastly, I tried my best to find information on counseling centers and what programs are put in places to help these students. Finding sources on mental health in youth was pretty easy because of how prevalent of an issue it is. But, I did find some trouble finding a lot of sources for counseling centers so I used the information specifically from Ball State's counseling center page and information from my own experiences. My knowledge grew immensely on topics that I thought I knew pretty well and this thesis opened my eyes to more problems in society that I want to improve upon.

Introduction:

Mental illness, also known as mental health disorder, can be defined as “a wide range of mental health conditions — disorders that affect your mood, thinking and

behavior. Examples of mental illness include depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders and addictive behaviors.” (Mental Illness-Symptoms and Causes). Those with mental illness have frequently been discriminated against and mistreated by the government and society. They were thrown into insane asylums and never taken seriously. They were seen as sick people that needed to be locked up. They were put in asylums and mistreated, instead of getting the proper treatment they needed. The stigma that came from the years and years of mistreatment is still around today. Although there has been a lot of research and improvements on mental illness and how people with a mental illness are treated, that stigma is still alive and taking its toll on people with mental illness. I had asked my family and friends for the first word that came to mind when they heard the term “mental illness”. I asked people of all different genders, ages, upbringings and sexual orientation. Some of their answers were unstable, sick and in need of help, and stigma. Their responses highlighted the way that mental illness is still perceived as exclusively negative. This stigma can be especially detrimental to those who have a mental illness, as well as the people who care for them. it can also be harmful to those who suspect they may have a mental illness. Mental illness tends to become recognizable when people are between the ages of 18-22. At that age, people are typically also experiencing their first chance at independence, going off to college and going through the process of identity formation. With these new life changes, mental illness can act as an additional -- and dangerous -- complication. On top of mental illness, being a member of a minority group like the LGBT community comes with other stigmas and stressors. If anyone knows anything about stigma and

public disapproval it is someone that fits into this community. For people in this specific situation, just starting college, it can cause a lot of stress. With my research, I would like to dive deeper into the mental illness for LGBTQ+ freshman college students, adding the two together and examining what we can do to make life even a little bit easier for people in these situations. While i'm not a member of the LGBT community, I will be using my own experiences as a college student with a mental illness to contextualize that element of my thesis, which will allow me to tie in the added complication faced by LGBTQ+ students. First I will take a look at college freshmen that have some kind of mental illness, then take a look at how mental illness affects people in the LGBTQ+ community, combine the two together to truly see the effect it has and lastly, take a look at the main source of help on campus, the counseling center and provide possible suggestions on how to improve the center and what they can do for their students.

College Freshman With Mental Illness

As a college freshman, I had so many emotions going through my head and heart. I was excited to start a new chapter of my life but scared at the same time. I come from a very close and supportive family and the thought of not having them there was terrifying. I was in a new environment with people I don't know, starting a journey that no one can ever really be prepared for. I know from recent experience that the amount of thoughts and emotions running through one's body at this time is overwhelming. On top of all of that, I was already diagnosed with GAD, General Anxiety Disorder at the age of 15. My first two years were rough but especially those first few months. It is weird to say but I was fortunate enough to already have coping mechanisms under my belt

and an understanding of what was happening with me. Not everyone is as lucky as I was. According to research done by the American Psychological Association states that “as if college were not difficult enough, more than one-third of first-year university students in eight industrialized countries around the globe report symptoms consistent with a diagnosable mental health disorder” (One in Three College Freshmen Worldwide Reports Mental Health Disorder). The National Alliance on Mental Illness found that 1 in 4 students have a diagnosable disease, 40% of those students do not seek help, 80% feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities and 50% feel so anxious that they struggled in school. They also lists that the top 5 mental illnesses among students today are anxiety, depression, eating disorders, addiction and suicide. (Top 5 Mental Health Challenges Facing College Students) These statistics alone show that not only are a lot of college freshmen dealing with mental illness in the United States, but around the world. As stated before by the National Alliance on Mental Illness, these students are struggling more than just emotionally and mentally. The fact that 50% of the students surveyed said that their anxiety is affecting their schoolwork is concerning and provides motivation to do more research on this topic. I have been in that position and as someone who prides themselves on being a good, attentive student, not being able to do that just added more onto an already overflowing plate.

For those students that are lucky enough to have a supportive family, this affects them as well, especially the parental figures. They are in new territory in more than one way. Sending their child off to college and trying to help them through this transition along with the possibility that they suffer from some type of mental illness out of the

blue. For some parents, they think that college is the only way to have a successful and fulfilled life. They want the best for their children and going to college will give them the best. But, That added pressure, although not necessarily intentional, can cause even more stress and difficulty. Dr. Rostain, co-author of *The Stressed Years of Their Lives*, comments that

“We're giving our kids everything we have and we care about them, but at the same time, what's the message? It's, ‘Oh you need to succeed or else we're going to really get upset,’ as opposed to, ‘Life is curvy, and there are moments of ups and downs.’ I think if the message from a parent to a kid is, ‘You may not know, but we expect that you'll be able to figure it out. Let's see what happens,’ [that] is different than saying, ‘You better do this. You better know that. You better not mess up.’ ... We want parents to deal with their own anxiety and then [be] able to let go in a way [that] more feels more natural. It's OK to not know.”
(College Students (And Their Parents) Face A Campus Mental Health 'Epidemic').

This new territory can trigger reactions and struggles for their child that they haven't been able to prepare for. Rostain comments that “today's college students are experiencing an ‘inordinate amount of anxiety’ — much of it centered on ‘surviving college and doing well.’” He goes on to say that “What we're seeing now are growing numbers of students coming [onto] campus who are already being treated for mental illness, or who are on various medications and who really have learned to manage their illnesses at home, but suddenly they're on their own and sometimes they're not

following through [with] their own recommended treatments." (College Students (And Their Parents) Face A Campus Mental Health 'Epidemic'). In an interview that he and the other co-author, B. Janet Hibbs did with NPR, they talk about the effects of going to college and other aspects of that transition. Hibbs talks about why some students have trouble adjusting to college and states that "I think most kids are still really happy to leave home. They want to be in the life of the pseudo-adult. But what they're unprepared for are what I would call ... the 'expectable challenges' that college poses — in terms of the requirement for more independence, more ownership of your hours, whether it's sleep, saying no to partying, managing yourself, basically" (College Students (And Their Parents) Face A Campus Mental Health 'Epidemic'). They also cover how parents can help their college-aged children deal with the anxiety. Hibbs says "I think growing up is a complicated process, and we all have to recognize that we're all still going through changes. So parents have to adapt to the idea of their child growing up and of letting go. And if they're anxious about it, [parents should] try to figure out why and to be more mindful about their reactions, and to try to be less reactive and more responsive when things are not going as hoped for" (College Students (And Their Parents) Face A Campus Mental Health 'Epidemic'). Lastly, they discuss why most college students don't go to the counseling centers and use their services. Rostain says that

"There are some startling surveys that show that among students who endorse suicidal ideation, suicidal thoughts on a regular basis, only about one in four go for help. The other three out of four say things like, 'Well, I can handle

this myself,' or 'It's not probably not that bad,' or, 'I don't have time.' And wishing that eventually it'll just go away on its own like a bad cold. Now, it may be true that for some students, they're able to plow through and avoid disaster. But what ... I have seen too often is [students] waiting too long to acknowledge and in a way staying in that state of denial. Not because you're deliberately doing so, but because you really don't want to have to face maybe having to take care of this. Or even worse, maybe having to leave school because you just can't function. You're so much a part of a community when you're in college. ... The thought that, 'Gee, I can't function anymore and I may need to take a break' — that's a hard pill to swallow, so to speak" (College Students (And Their Parents) Face A Campus Mental Health 'Epidemic').

While other factors influence a student's choice of whether to seek help from a counseling center, the centers themselves can have a significant impact on this decision. For more information on this topic, please refer to the appendix.

LGBTQ+ Students

The second aspect of my thesis looks at students that are in the LGBTQ+ community that are starting college. As discussed previously, starting college is a very formative time for all students. By also being a member of the LGBTQ+ community, there is an added element of difficulty to this new life. Belonging in a minority group of any kind is an added obstacle that not all students need to face. It is similar to being from a low income family or being a person of color. There are things that people that are in these communities that white, cisgender people can't relate to. Specifically with

the LGBTQ+ community, there is a lot of stigmatization and hate that comes with that. Although our society has come a long way in how we treat and view people in the LGBTQ+ community, that doesn't mean that everyone has evolved and is accepting of what they view as not normal. A report done by the National Survey of Family and Growth states that 9.6% of youth from the ages of 19-24 identify as LGBT. (National Estimate of LGBTQ Youth Seriously Considering Suicide). In a survey done by the Human Rights Campaign, 4 out of 10 LGBTQ+ youth say that the area that they live in is not accepting of their sexual orientation. Two times of the LGBTQ+ youth are twice more likely as their peers to say that they have been physically assaulted, kicked or shoved at. 26% of LGBTQ+ youth say that their biggest problems are not being accepted by their families, trouble at school/ bullying and a fear of being out and open. The same survey says that non-LGBTQ+ youth say that their biggest problems are trouble with school and classes. All of these hardships of not being accepted, being afraid to be who you are can take a huge toll on anyone. I am heterosexual so I can't personally relate to what these people are feeling and going through but one of my best friends recently came out as gay and it has been eye-opening to be going through this experience with them. I am purposefully using gender neutral terms and omitting the name for privacy reasons. Seeing the reactions of family, friends and peers has been really educational. The survey also stated that 9 out of 10 students are out to their close friends and 64% are out to their classmates. 75 percent of the youth say that most of their peers are okay with them being in the LGBTQ+ community. (Growing Up LGBT in America: View and Share Statistics) This friend came out to their sister, me and other

college friends before coming out to anyone else. Besides their sister, they only came out to close friends at first because they knew they would be accepting and with their parents it wasn't the case. I am lucky to have grown up in a family that I know will love and support me no matter what but a lot of other people my age don't have that. Knowing this and being fully aware of how lucky I am has made my passion for helping those in minority communities like the LGBTQ+ community even stronger. No one should ever be shunned by family or friends for the way that they are born. As a country and society, we need to just learn to be more open-minded to what we see as not the norm and accept people for who they are.

Freshman LGBTQ+ Students

This thesis paper has discussed the hardships that college freshmen go through in the beginning of college and the hardships that students in the LGBTQ+ community go through. Both groups face some unique challenges but when you put them together, it makes for a very difficult transitional time in one's life. With these students, not only are they having to adapt to a new normal and handle the stress of starting at a new school, but they are also dealing with the societal pressures of being in the LGBTQ+ community and the mental and emotional toll all of this can take on a person. College is also a time for all people to truly find themselves which can be a very scary period in one's life. The idea of heteronormativity and homophobia on college campuses adds to the anxiety and depression that students in the LGBTQ+ community will face. Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexual people are the norm. This is dominant in our culture in avenues such as policies, laws, language and rituals. Homophobia is

the fear of homosexuality. Although most college campuses have clubs or organizations that are for students in the LGBTQ+ community to feel comfortable, they can't spend all of their time in that safe bubble. The effect of heteronormativity adds to the increasing mental health issues for LGBTQ+ students such as anxiety, depression and suicide. It also affects those that are still in the closet or questioning their identity to feel even more isolated, marginalized, excluded or devalued. However, groups like Spectrum at Ball State are important to challenge the idea of heteronormativity. There should be places on college campuses that are designed to challenge heteronormativity as well as support those in the LGBTQ+ community. Having a center for LGBTQ+ students, faculty and staff will make everyone feel safe. Having the faculty and staff involved will give these new students familiar and safe faces to look for when they are struggling.

Counseling Centers:

Counseling centers and their services have become a very important deal on college campuses. I went on nine college tours before deciding on Ball State and each school, no matter what size, always disclosed information about the services they had. These colleges are aware enough to know how important mental health is, especially with the age of their students. But, as the survey quoted before said, 3 out of 4 college students will not go to the counseling center or try out any of their services they offer. In a paper written by Christopher J. MicKinley and Erin k. Ruppel titled *Exploring how perceived threat and self-efficacy contribute to college students' use and perceptions of online mental health resources*, they state that "College students often struggle with

mental health issues when grappling with a university environment filled with academic and social pressures. While mental health concerns are prevalent among people this age prior research indicates that many young adults will not search for help that sufficiently addresses the severity of their condition (Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007; Sullivan, Arensman, Keeley, Corcoran, & Perry, 2004).” McKinley and Ruppel have very telling data on these issues. In the article, they discuss the severity that mental illness has on a student's performance and success in school.

“Furthermore, when seeking assistance, the on-campus services offered may be inadequate. Recent data found that 62% of students who dropped out of college with mental health issues acknowledged the main reason being the challenge of managing school with mental health (National Alliance on Mental Illness [NAMI], 2012). The same study also found that nearly 40% of students seeking mental health services reported appointment wait times of 5 days or more (NAMI). Given both the reluctance to seek treatment as well as the possible inadequacies of on-campus services, it is critical to isolate factors that motivate college students to seek out other resources.” (Kitzrow, M.A. (2003). (The Mental Health Needs of Today's College Students: Challenges and Recommendations.).

When I was a freshman I remember going to the counseling center to try it out. I had been seeing therapists and counselors since I was about 15 so I thought I might need someone out in Muncie. But, I was a little disappointed with the situation. The students get 12 free appointments but getting those appointments is hard. It was nearly

impossible for it to be something consistent. In my experience, I had a different person the three times I went in. That made it hard to make much progress for me because each time I had to try and warm up to the counselor or grad student I had, fill them in on my situation and by that time a good chunk of our time was done. A lot of the time, it was a few weeks in between appointments and I needed something more routine and regular. Although this was my experience, Ball State in particular does offer a lot of different services such as individual counseling, group sessions, a self help tab, psychiatric counseling and a resource and relaxation lounge. They also introduced Well-Track, a new online self-help program for students dealing with stress, anxiety or depression. The website says that "The program is online/mobile and self-directed. It allows you to identify goals and learn powerful strategies to improve mental health. It is FREE and available to all Ball State University students." (Counseling Center-Campus Life). People that are in the LGBTQ+ community typically need guidance since they are going through some very unique situations in life. In an article in TalkSpace, Doctor Jon Paul says that "The National Alliance on Mental Illness states that LGBTQ+ people are almost three times more likely to experience a mental health condition. For those in the community, many are dealing with issues related to societal bias, systems of fear, and trauma related to both gender and sexuality. Mental health is something that, for many, is hidden because of stigma related to intersectional identities". (A Guide to College Mental Health for LGBTQ Students). Most college students will try and find a club or organization to join on campus that has to do with being in the LGBTQ+ community. The most popular club on Ball State's campus is Spectrum. This club is for all people,

whether in the LGBTQ+ community or an ally. But, due to their popularity on campus, they need more resources to help all of the students in their organization. From my personal conversations with the president, I have learned that the president of the club essentially serves as a counselor for all of the students in the club. But the president is still a student and is still learning and growing themselves. They need more help than just their peers. They need professionals that are there to help them and their specific situation. Some other statistics given say that “Rates of mental illness continue to be higher for those who identify as bisexual/questioning. Those in this population between the ages of 18-24 are three times more likely to attempt suicide. The rates are even higher for transgender students, who are four times more likely to attempt suicide, with 38%-65% experiencing suicidal ideation”(LGBT College Statistics). If there were specific counselors that at least specialized in LGBTQ+ students and issues but were also qualified to work with all students, that would be immensely helpful and beneficial. Having people in the counseling center that are known to be there for these students might make them more comfortable and willing to get help. The counseling center at Ball State has group sessions sometimes for people in the LGBTQ+ community but some people don't feel comfortable in that setting. The Ball State Counseling center and all counseling centers on college campuses need to advertise to all types of students while being aware of what each specific type of student needs. The counseling center has been making some major changes that are in the right direction, But these services need to be advertised in a way that ensures more students will know they exist and understand how they work. College students get bombarded with emails everyday,

which can make it easy for them to overlook or miss. They are often impersonal, especially if sent to a large sum of the student body. Instead, mental health should be something that is discussed more personally. Having some open and honest conversations about these types of things will decrease the stigma attached to mental illness and will also show the student that they have the support of the parents or guardians.

Conclusion:

Starting college is a transitional time for all people. Beginning this new phase in one's life can be very exciting but also very anxiety inducing. Being on your own for the first time can bring up issues and obstacles that you may have not had to deal with before, such as depression, anxiety and more. As someone who went into college knowing that I had General Anxiety Disorder, I knew it would be a very hard transition. Statistics showed that this age is when a lot of mental illness can pop up unannounced and when you are someone who has never dealt with this kind of thing before, it is an added stressor to the new stage of life you are starting. LGBTQ+ freshmen students have an added amount of difficulty due to the discrimination and obstacles they face as just being in the LGBTQ+ community. Not to mention adding mental illness into that mix. Personally, I can't begin to understand their struggles due to the fact that I am not LGBTQ+ but it is undeniable that they go through more than your average freshman. Looking at the intersection of these two groups gives me and hopefully others a better understanding of how truly difficult this time can be. After only doing a semester long thesis paper on the topic, I can't say that I have a clear answer on how to make their

lives perfect. But, my ideas of having a more diverse group of counselors at the counseling center that are there specifically for minority groups is one way that I believe will help. Also, really advertising that this is something very normal for college freshmen to go through, not just through emails, would hopefully make them feel more comfortable going into the counseling center to at least talk to someone and to get a better understanding of what they are going through. This thesis has been eye-opening and I hope my research and personal experience can show how important it is that we make helping these students a priority.

Appendix:

Table 2. Chance-Corrected Agreement Between 17 Candidate Screening Items and the SIQ for the Assessment of Risk for Suicide in Entire Cohort of Patients With Medical/Surgical and Psychiatric Concerns

Item No.	Question	Yes, %	LR	κ (95% CI)	C Statistic
1	Has something very stressful happened to you in the past few weeks?	48.1	50.3	0.24 (0.17 to 0.31)	0.69
2	In the past few weeks, have you felt so nervous or worried in a way that felt unbearable, like you couldn't stand it anymore?	29.8	106.4	0.45 (0.36 to 0.53)	0.77
3	In the past few weeks, have you been bullied or picked on so much that you felt like you couldn't stand it anymore?	11.5	10.2	0.14 (0.04 to 0.24)	0.56
4	Do you or anyone in your life think you have a problem with drugs or alcohol?	10.3	28.1	0.24 (0.14 to 0.35)	0.60
5	Have you ever felt hopeless, like things would never get better?	51.7	89.5	0.29 (0.23 to 0.36)	0.75
6	Do you feel like you might as well give up because you can't make things better for yourself?	24.0	182.8	0.62 (0.54 to 0.70)	0.85
7	In the past few weeks, have you been sad or depressed most of the time?	40.0	151.3	0.45 (0.38 to 0.53)	0.82
8	In the past few weeks, have you felt so sad or depressed in a way that felt unbearable, like you couldn't stand it anymore? ^a	24.3	170.1	0.60 (0.52 to 0.68)	0.83
9	In the past few weeks, have you felt that you or your family would be better off if you were dead? ^a	16.4	239.9	0.75 (0.67 to 0.82)	0.86
10	In the past few weeks, have you thought that your life was so bad that you didn't want to live anymore? ^a	18.6	224.2	0.72 (0.64 to 0.80)	0.86
11	In the past few weeks, have you wished you were dead? ^a	19.7	273.4	0.78 (0.72 to 0.85)	0.90
12	Are you here because you tried to hurt yourself? ^a	13.9	102.5	0.50 (0.39 to 0.59)	0.72
13	Have you ever tried to hurt yourself in the past? ^a	24.5	97.5	0.46 (0.36 to 0.55)	0.75
14	Have you ever seriously considered killing yourself? ^a	19.3	181.0	0.65 (0.56 to 0.73)	0.83
15	In the past week, have you been having thoughts about killing yourself? ^a	15.8	207.4	0.70 (0.62 to 0.78)	0.83
16	Have you ever tried to kill yourself? ^a	13.9	97.0	0.48 (0.38 to 0.58)	0.72
17 ^b	Do you have close friends or family that you can go to when you have a serious problem?	93.1	19.6	-0.06 (-0.09 to 0.02)	0.57

Abbreviations: LR, likelihood ratio; SIQ, Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire.

^aTrigger item questions for a psychiatric consultation.

^bWhile uncommon, a negative κ suggests that this item agrees with the SIQ less than would be expected by chance.

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